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Improvements in and relating to fibre reinforced preforms

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IMPROVEMENTS IN AND RELATING TO FIBRE
REINFORCED PREFORMS

DESCRIPTION

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This invention relates to the manufacture of shaped articles incorporating a high content of fibrous material and has particular reference to the manufacture of boards, sleeves, bricks and other shapes. Shaped fibrous articles or preforms are frequently used for the reinforcement of metals. The fibres of such preforms are generally short, chopped fibres, or in the form of a fibre blanket in which the fibres are arranged in a random manner in a blanket.

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The use of continuous filaments, i.e. fibres having a length greater than say 2 cm have several advantages in the use of fibre reinforcement of metals since this provides an improved continuity of the reinforcement and much improved mechanical properties of the resulting cermet. It will be appreciated by the man skilled in the art that where fibrous preforms are used for metal reinforcement in for example the manufacture of cermets, the fibrous content of the preform must be predominantly of a

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refractory fibre in order to prevent decomposition and undue gasing when the hot molten metal is cast about the preform.

The use of continuous filaments in the reinforcement of metals presents a difficulty because of the retention of those filaments in a desired orientation while the metal is caused to infuse or permeate interstices or spaces between adjacent filaments. Many attempts have been made to orient continuous or long filaments in this way, but as the metal is cast around the filament array, disturbance of the filaments occur such that the desired orientation cannot be obtained in a reproducible manner.

According to the present invention, therefore, there is provided a preform for use in the reinforcement of metal which preform comprises a first matrix of discontinuous fibres and a second matrix of long or continuous filaments, said first and second matrixes overlying each other in a predetermined relative orientation. The short fibres within the first matrix are preferably oriented in one direction and the longer continuous filaments of the second matrix are disposed therein either in the general direction of orientation of the short fibres or substantially transverse thereto.

By producing a preform in the manner described above, the continuity of the preform due to the presence of the continuous filaments is much greater and hence preforms of much lighter density than hitherto can be 5 produced. This in turn allows during casting easier access of the metal into the preform to form a finished article.

In an alternative embodiment of the present invention, a preform may be formed by known methods 10 and continuous filaments may be wound or otherwise disposed on the surface of the preform prior to the introduction of the metal layer.

The present invention also includes a method of forming a preform for use in the 15 reinforcement of metals which method comprises incorporating long or continuous filaments therein, which filaments are supported by a matrix of a short fibre composition. A part preform may be formed by preparing a slurry of a short fibre composition, 20 introducing the slurry into a mould, pressing the slurry to expel liquid therefrom in one direction to obtain substantial orientation of the short fibres arranging the continuous filaments in a desired orientation in juxtaposition to the surface of a part 25 preform so formed, applying a second part preform

thereto to form the completed shape and drying the completed preform so formed. An additional pressing stage may be provided and after drying the preform may be calcined at an elevated temperature.

5 In an alternative embodiment of the present invention, the second part preform may be applied by forming said second part in situ. This may be effected by introducing a further quantity of slurry into the mould, pressing said further quantity of
10 slurry to remove liquid therefrom in one direction to produce substantially uniform orientation of the short fibres therein, thus serving to sandwich the continuous filaments between the two parts of the preform thus formed thus forming a substantially
15 continuous matrix thereabout. After the pressing, the preform is removed from the mould and dried and thereafter calcined at an elevated temperature.

[~~In yet a further embodiment of the present~~
20 invention the long or continuous filaments may be included in an aqueous slurry within a mould and the contents of the mould then subject to dewatering in one direction to orient the short fibres within the composition to produce a shaped preform having said
25 long or continuous filaments dispersed in a matrix of
~~said short fibre composition.~~]

In a further embodiment of the present invention, two separate part preforms may be produced which are adapted to mate to form the desired preform and long or continuous filaments may be disposed between the 5 two parts in a predetermined array before the parts are put together to form the final preform.

In the reinforcement of metal, the fibrous content of the preform matrix is substantially inorganic fibres and preferably, synthetic inorganic 10 fibres. The use of these synthetic inorganic fibres has the advantage of minimising the number of additives, particularly organic additives, necessary to obtain shape maintenance of the composition on forming and further reduces the amount of water likely 15 to be absorbed in a material which will require removal prior to calcining at an elevated temperature.

Man-made inorganic fibres suffer from the disadvantage that unlike their organic counterparts they are more difficult to maintain in suspension to 20 obtain the required degree of orientation of the fibres on formation of the shaped articles.

In accordance with the present invention, preformed compositions that have been traditionally employed are used to provide the support for the continuous filament reinforcement for use in the metal composite or cermet. The production of the preform

composition comprises short lengths (up to two, or to a maximum of 15 centimetres) with a binding agent and forming a mixture of fibres and binding agents into a slurry, introducing said slurry into a mould, pressing the slurry to expel the slurry liquid therefrom in one direction to obtain orientation of the short fibres in a resultant shaped article, introducing the continuous filaments into the mould in a desired orientation, reintroducing a further aliquot of the slurry
5 composition into the mould, further pressing to expel slurry liquid therefrom, thereby incorporating the continuous filaments in a matrix of short fibre composition, continuing pressing until the preform has a self-sustaining shape, drying the preform so formed
10 and thereafter calcining at an elevated temperature.
15

The composite fibre filament preform thus formed has the advantage that continuous filaments can be maintained in positions and orientations which give the required properties to the resultant castings
20 without having to be dispersed generally throughout components which normally incur higher costs and may confer unwanted properties in particular areas.
Expensive filaments can be accurately located in areas which will benefit most from them.

25 Preheated fibre preforms will thermally insulate

continuous filaments inside them against heat loss which could otherwise be substantial during the transfer of the preform from the preheating furnace of a casting machine. The heat loss from the fibre preforms is less critical than heat loss from the continuous filaments because fibres can be infiltrated with metal at low temperatures, indeed even at room temperature.

5 Fibres or filaments which reduce corrosion resistance if they break through the surface composite such as fibres of boron and carbon, can be held away from the casting surfaces by positioning a layer of fibre composition near the surface which latter does not reduce corrosion resistance.

10 Furthermore, aluminium alloy composites with alumina fibres at the surface can be readily anodised. Filaments held in place in fibre preforms do not reduce or eliminate the requirement for bonding agents. Bonding agents can interfere with metal to fibre interactions at the fibre surface and within the interstices of the preform and thus can reduce composite properties. While fibre preforms are mainly used to hold the filaments in position in castings, they also contribute to improvements in properties in 20 the final component.

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Some metal to filament composites cannot be readily shaped by conventional workshop tools.

Metal/ceramic fibre composites are more easily shaped. In accordance with the invention, the filaments can be held in place in the castings in positions which will not require machining so that shaping need only be carried out on parts of the castings reinforced with fibre alone.

Typical filaments for use in accordance with the present invention are boron filaments, carbon filaments and continuous filaments of magnesium, boron and silicon carbide.

The fibrous composition to be used as a matrix from which these supporting preforms are formed, may comprise any inorganic fibrous material having a melting point greater than 1000°C. Typical inorganic fibres may be selected from fibres of alumina, magnesia, boron, silicon carbide and carbon. These fibrous materials are mixed with an inorganic binder which may be typically selected from colloidal silica, colloidal alumina, acids and salts of phosphorous and chromium. The inorganic fibre may also be used in conjunction with an organic binder and typical organic binders are selected from starch, cellulose

fibre, gums and synthetic resin. Where the organic fibre is a cellulosic fibre, this may be comminuted newspaper.

The slurry is preferably an aqueous slurry and
5 the compression ratio within the pressing step is
within the range 2:1 to 10:1. Because of the
difficulty of maintaining inorganic fibres in
suspension, the pressing and shaping process is
preferably characterised by introducing the slurry
10 into a mould and subjecting the slurry therein to a
hydrostatic pressure to a predetermined threshold
without substantial settlement of the slurry solids
taking place, further pressing at a pressure above
said threshold accompanied by monoaxial orientation
15 and deposition of the fibres whereby the rate of
deliquification is controlled so that at least 95% of
the fibres have an orientation within 15° of said
axis.

The threshold pressure to which the slurry is
20 subjected prior to substantial deliquification taking
place is preferably at least 20% of the final pressure
exerted on the solid constituents of the slurry. The
threshold pressure maintained during the
deliquification of the slurry should produce a balance

between the applied pressure at or above the threshold
and the rate of deliquification necessary to obtain to
obtain the maximum fibre orientation, thus obtaining
the maximum improvement in properties of the shaped
5 fibre mat. In a further embodiment, more than 50% of
the pressure finally applied may constitute the
threshold pressure and pressures even greater than 80%
to the final applied pressure may be employed. The
upper limit of pressing is that at which under
10 pressure alone, the fibres alter significantly their
characteristics and properties.

After pressing and shaping, the preform so formed
is dried and subsequently calcined at at least 600°C
to remove any organic constituents.

15 Thereafter, the preform may be used to form a
metal composite and the metal material may be
introduced in the product in order to produce a strong
cermet composition. The introduction of the metal may
be effected by any conventional casting processes such as
20 squeeze casting, die-casting, sand casting and vacuum
infiltration/gas pressurization.

In a typical example, a composite of alumina
fibre reinforced aluminium may be prepared in which
the composite has between 20 and 30% of final

composite weight of fibre content. The liquid metal
is introduced into the shaped preform to penetrate the
interstices of the fibrous mat and surround the
filament reinforcement therein. The temperature of
the metal and the pressures applied may be varied
depending on the particular circumstances and the
density of the preformed thus formed.

One advantage of the present invention is that
the structural strength of the preforms thus formed are
significantly improved. This results in the
possibility of the production of preforms having much
reduced densities and yet still maintaining their
structural continuity under conditions under which
metal is introduced in the fibre/filament interstices
within the preform. As a result, the metal
penetration of the preform is much more easily
effected and in consequence this allows the
possibility of gravity casting techniques in the
formation of cermets.

CLAIMS:

1. A preform for use in the reinforcement of metal which preform comprises a first matrix of discontinuous fibres and a second matrix of long or continuous filaments, said first and second matrixes overlying each other in a predetermined relative orientation.
- 10 2. A preform according to claim 1 wherein the continuous filaments are wound about the exterior of the first matrix of discontinuous fibres.
- 15 3. A preform according to claim 1 wherein the continuous filaments are orientated into the predetermined orientation by dewatering from an aqueous slurry in a single direction.
- 20 4. A preform according to any preceding claim wherein a further matrix of discontinuous fibres overlies the first continuous fibre matrix and the second matrix of long or continuous filaments disposed thereupon.

5. A preform according to any preceding claim wherein two preforms according to claim 1 are adapted to be interlockable to form a single composite preform.

5 6. A preform according to any preceding claim further including an inorganic or organic bonding agent selected from colloidal silica, colloidal alumina, acids and salts of phosphorous or chromium, starch, cellulosic fibres, gums or synthetic resins.

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7. A preform according to any preceding claim wherein the fibres are selected from alumina, boron, silicon carbide, or carbon.

15 8. A method of forming a preform for use in the reinforcement of metal, said preform comprising long or continuous filaments in a matrix overlying a matrix of discontinuous fibres which method comprises preparing a slurry of discontinuous fibres, introducing said slurry into a mould, pressing said slurry to expel liquid to give a first preform, of discontinuous fibres orientating continuous filaments in juxtaposition to the so-formed preform, and, drying the so-formed preform.

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9. A method of forming a preform for use in the reinforcement of metals which preform comprises long or continuous filaments in a matrix overlying a matrix of discontinuous fibres which method comprises
5 preparing a first mat or blanket of discontinuous fibres, inter-engaging said first mat or blanket with a plurality of overlying long or continuous filaments, orientated said filaments in a predetermined direction, thereby to form a composite preform.

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10. A method according to claim 8 or 9, wherein a second preform formed of a discontinuous matrix is formed over said so formed preform to form a sandwich construction.

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11. A method according to any of claims 8 to 10, further including a calcining step at an elevated temperature of at least 600°C.

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12. A method according to claim 10 when dependent upon claim 8, wherein the second preform is formed by introducing a further quantity of slurry into the mould, pressing said quantity to remove liquid,

thereby to form a substantially orientated discontinuous matrix thereabout.

13. A method according to claim 12 wherein the first
5 and/or second slurry is dewatered unidirectionally to orientate the discontinuous fibres.

14. A method according to any of claims 8 to 13,
wherein the fibres are preheated prior to infiltration
10 with a liquid metal.

15. A casting process which comprises introducing a preform according to any of claims 1 to 7 or made by a process of any of claims 8 to 14 into a die, casting a
15 metal thereabout, to cause said metal to infiltrate said preform.

16. A preform substantially as hereinbefore set forth.

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17. A method for the preparation of a preform substantially as hereinbefore set forth.

18. A method of casting, utilizing a preform substantially as hereinbefore set forth.
